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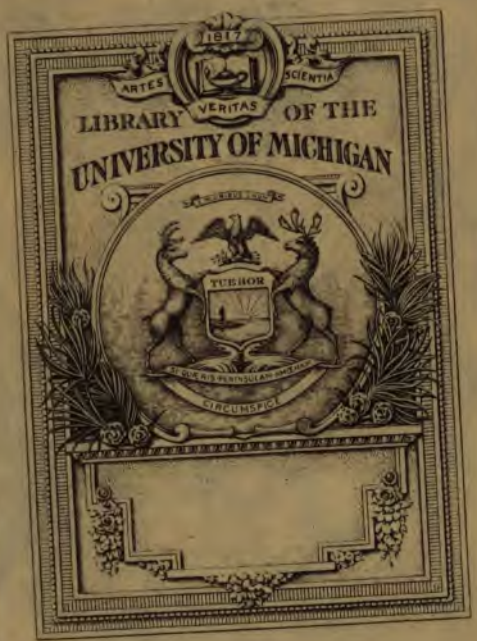
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The John Crerar Library

A Free Public Reference Library
of Scientific Literature

1894–1901

BY

CLEMENT W. ANDREWS, A.M.

LIBRARIAN

With a Portrait

CHICAGO
1902

[REPRINT FROM BLANCHARD'S HISTORY OF CHICAGO]

85904

JOHN CRERAR.

THE JOHN CRERAR LIBRARY.

The John Crerar Library, the latest established of the free public libraries of the city, owes its existence to the bequest of the late John Crerar.

Mr. Crerar, for many years a prominent citizen of Chicago, was of Scotch ancestry, the son of John and Agnes (Smeallie) Crerar. Born in New York in 1827, he was educated in the schools of that city, and entered into business there, becoming a member of the firm of Jessup, Kennedy & Co. Coming to Chicago in 1862, he established the firm of Crerar, Adams & Co., dealers in railroad supplies, and accumulated a large fortune. At the time of his death he was a director of the Pullman Palace Car Co., of the Chicago & Alton Railroad Co., of the Illinois Trust and Savings Bank, and president of the Chicago & Joliet Railroad Co. He was a member and trustee of the Second Presbyterian church, and gave liberally of his time and money to the work of his church. He was greatly interested in the charitable institutions of the city, being a director of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society and of the Presbyterian Hospital, and vice-president of the Chicago Orphan Asylum. All of these and many others were liberally remembered in his will. He was equally prominent socially, and was a member of the Chicago, Calumet, Union, Commercial and Literary clubs.

Mr. Crerar died October 19, 1889. His will, dated August 5, 1886, was admitted to probate November 14, 1889, and its validity was finally established by a decision of the Supreme court of Illinois, rendered June 19, 1893. In this will specific bequests of more than $600,000 were made to relatives and friends, and of nearly $1,000,000 to charitable institutions and public purposes.

The fiftieth section of the will disposed of the remainder of the estate in the following words:

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Recognizing the fact that I have been a resident of Chicago since 1862, and that the greater part of my fortune has been accumulated here, and acknowledging with hearty gratitude the kindness that has always been extended to me by my many friends, and by my business and social acquaintances and associates, I give, devise and bequeath all the rest, remainder and residue of my estate, both real and personal, for the erection, creation, maintenance and endowment of a free public library, to be called "The John Crerar Library," and to be located in the city of Chicago, Ill., a preference being given to the South Division of the city, in as much as the Newberry Library will be located in the North Division. I direct that my executors and trustees cause an act of incorporation under the laws of Illinois, to be procured to carry out the purpose of this bequest; and I request that Norman Williams be made the first president thereof; and that, in addition to my executors and trustees, the following named friends of mine will act as the first board of directors in such corporation, and aid and assist my executors and trustees therein, namely: Marshall Field, E. W. Blatchford, T. B. Blackstone, Robert T. Lincoln, Henry W. Bishop, Edward G. Mason, Albert Keep, Edson Keith, Simon J. McPherson, John M. Clark and George A. Armour, or their survivors. I desire the building to be tasteful, substantial and fireproof, and that a sufficient fund be reserved over and above the cost of its construction to provide, maintain and support a library for all time. I desire the books and periodicals selected with a view to create and sustain a healthy moral and Christian sentiment in the community, and that all nastiness and immorality be excluded. I do not mean by this that there shall not be anything but hymn books and sermons, but I mean that dirty French novels and all skeptical trash and works of questionable moral tone shall never be found in this library. I want its atmosphere that of Christian refinement, and its aim and object the building up of character, and I rest content that the friends I have named will carry out my wishes in these particulars.

The amount thus bequeathed was estimated at the time to be about $2,500,000, but it was hoped that improvement in the business conditions of the country would materially increase this sum. These hopes have been amply realized, and in December, 1901, the total endowment, on a most conservative estimate, was $3,400,000.

The administration of the estate in the Probate court was closed July 13, 1894. Meanwhile the trustees of the estate had co-operated with the trustees of the Newberry estate in securing legislation which seemed needed for the better organization and administration of endowed libraries, embodied in "An act to encourage and promote the establishment of free public libraries," approved June 17, 1891. Under this act the John Crerar Library was incorporated on October 12, 1894, and duly organized January 12, 1895. All of the

directors named by Mr. Crerar nine years before were living and present, and Norman Williams was elected the first president, as Mr. Crerar desired.

Mr. Williams gave much time and thought to the development of the library, and retained the presidency until his death in 1899. He was succeeded by Huntington W. Jackson, who, both as trustee of the estate and as chairman of the committee on administration, had already proved his interest in the library, which was further manifested by a bequest of $1,000, notable as the first bequest received by the institution other than the one by which it was founded. His death followed too soon, in January, 1901, and he was succeeded by Hon. Peter Stenger Grosscup. Other deaths and removals from the city have changed materially the constitution of the board of directors, which in December, 1901, consisted of the following gentlemen: Marshall Field, E. W. Blatchford, Robert T. Lincoln, Henry W. Bishop, Albert Keep, John M. Clark, Frank S. Johnson, Peter Stenger Grosscup, Arthur J. Caton, Marvin Hughitt, Thomas D. Jones, John J. Mitchell, Leonard A. Busby and the mayor and comptroller of Chicago, *ex officiis*. The treasurer, William J. Louderback, and the librarian, Clement W. Andrews, were appointed in 1895 and have served to the present time.

The first act of the directors, after organization, was to declare that the whole amount of the bequest was not too large for the sufficient fund which they were required to reserve in order to provide, maintain and support the library for all time, and that therefore the endowment should not be encroached upon either for land, building or books, but that a building fund should be accumulated from the income. This fund in January, 1902, amounted to nearly $400,000.

The second act of the directors was to determine the character and scope of the library. The trustees of the estate had prepared a list of the public libraries of the city, giving their character and size. The actual

and prospective development of the Chicago Public Library as a great lending library, and of the Newberry Library as a great reference library in certain fields largely influenced the trustees to suggest that the John Crerar Library be made a reference library, embracing such departments as were not fully occupied by any other existing library in Chicago, and that the number of departments be limited to such as the funds of the library could render complete and unique.

After a careful consideration of the whole subject the directors unanimously decided to establish a free public reference library of scientific and technical literature. This decision seemed to them to accord with the particular business activities by which the greater part of Mr. Crerar's fortune had been accumulated, to exclude naturally certain questionable classes of books which his will distinctly prohibits, and to favor the aim and object which it expressly points out. As personal friends, who had been acquainted with his wise and generous purposes, and with his civic patriotism and gratitude, they believed that he would surely have wished his gift to supplement, in the most effective way, the existing and prospective library collections of Chicago, and to be of the greatest possible value to the whole city.

Accordingly, a series of conferences with the trustees of the Chicago Public Library and the Newberry Library was held, and an elastic scheme for the division of the field was adopted. The special field of the John Crerar Library may be defined as that of the natural, physical and social sciences, and their applications. It is the purpose of the directors to develop the library as symmetrically as possible within these limits, and to make it exceptionally rich in files of scientific and technical periodicals, both American and foreign.

The years 1895 and 1896 were fully occupied in the preliminary work of organization. A librarian was appointed, a staff selected and temporary quarters secured

by leasing the whole of the sixth floor and later one-half the fifth floor of the Marshall Field & Co. building, 87 Wabash avenue. The suite consists of a reading room, two stack rooms, directors' room and other rooms needed for the administration of the library. The reading room, accommodating nearly 100 readers, is fitted in dark oak. Around the walls is shelved a collection of 3,000 volumes, intended to include, besides general works of reference, the best works, both advanced and popular, on each important subject within the scope of the library, and a selection of other works especially interesting or much in demand. The room contains also the periodical alcove, with 1,500 periodicals currently received, and the public card catalogues. The latter contain the titles of all the books in the library, printed upon cards and arranged in three ways, alphabetically by authors, alphabetically by subjects, and classed by subjects. The last named arrangement is the one most consulted, and no pains have been spared to make it as full and accurate as possible. Its unusual fullness and also the triple arrangement, which is not known to be in actual use elsewhere, have been made possible by the printed catalogue cards. They have made possible also the distribution of the catalogue to seven other institutions, interested in its work. These catalogues are supplemented by an extensive collection on bibliography, including card indexes to agriculture, botany, mathematics, photography and zoölogy.

April 1, 1897, the library was opened to the public, without formalities. Even before the fitting of the rooms was completed the purchase of books had been begun, and at the time of opening there were 15,000 volumes ready for use, and 7,000 more in preparation. On December 31, 1901, there were over 75,000. It is already a fair working library in most of the subjects within its scope, and is, indeed, much more than this in some, notably in American natural history, engineering, mathematics and ornithology.

The use of the library by the public has fully justified the action of the directors. Beginning with an average of eighty a day, the attendance has increased to more than 175, in spite of the fact that the library is so situated as to escape the notice of one seeking it, rather than to attract the attention of the passer-by. The recorded use, which does not include books from the shelves in the reading room, those read in the stack rooms, or periodicals read in the periodical alcove, has increased even more rapidly, and for 1901 was more than 40,000 volumes and periodicals. The total use is about three times that number.

In 1901 the directors took up the question of a permanent site, and decided that the greatest usefulness of the library could be secured only by a central location. They therefore appealed to the state legislature and to the city council, for permission to erect a building on what is commonly known as the Lake Front. This permission was granted by the legislature in "An act to authorize the John Crerar Library to erect and maintain a free public library on Grant Park . . . " approved March 29, 1901, and by the city council in an ordinance passed March 18, 1901. The act provides that the library shall procure the consent of such abutting property owners as have the right to object. The site granted is the space bounded by Madison street, the Illinois Central railroad, Monroe street and Michigan avenue. The dimensions are approximately 400 feet front by 300 feet depth; and it is proposed, as soon as the required frontage consents can be secured, to build a rectangular building of 300 feet frontage in classic style. The sketch plans provide for the storage of about 1,000,000 volumes and the accommodation of about 500 readers, and for future extensions more than doubling this capacity. With such accommodations, and in such a locality, the library will undoubtedly enter at once upon a career of greatly increased usefulness. CLEMENT W. ANDREWS.